In search of Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* in Vidarbha, Maharashtra

Raju Kasambe#, Anil Pimplapure* and **Gopal Thosar****

Corresponding author: # Raju Kasambe, G-1, Laxmi Apartments, 64, Vidya Vihar Colony, Pratap Nagar, Nagpur-440022, Maharashtra, E-mail: kasambe.raju@gmail.com,
*Q-12, Siddhivinayak Apartments, Laxmi Nagar, Nagpur-440022, Maharashtra
**Honorary Wildlife Warden, 66, Ganesh Colony, Pratap Nagar, Nagpur-440022, Maharashtra

Background and Introduction:

Notwithstanding the anxiety and genuine apprehension expressed by well wishers like Sridhar (Publisher, NLBW) and Dr. Asad Rahamani (Director, BNHS), we embarked on a short expedition into Gadchiroli district, which forms the far eastern part of Maharashtra. We were wandering into a notorious trouble-torn area risking our lives, only hoping to rediscover the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) in Maharashtra!

Jerdon's Courser is a small cursorial bird and inhabits open patches in scrub jungle. It is endemic to southern India, where it is principally known from southern Andhra Pradesh. It has an extremely limited geographical range comprising the Godaveri river valley near Sironcha and Bhadrachalam, and from the Cuddapah and Anantpur areas in the valley of the Pennar River (Ali and Ripley) (Birdlife International, 2001). It is mostly active at dusk and during the night. It was first recorded in the mid 19th century, it was then considered to be extinct for more than 80 years, until it was rediscovered in 1986 at Cuddapah District, Andhra Pradesh. In Maharashtra it was reported at "24 km east of Sironcha, near the Godavari river, three birds, undated (Blanford 1867, 1869), and sometime in the 20-year period before 1935 (D'Abreu, 1935)".

We undertook a three day (from 9th June to 11 June 2006) expedition into the Naxalite hit Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, which was once upon a time a favorite haunt for the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser.

Planning:

We planned the itinerary well in advance. We took certain steps in view of the omni present Naxal activity in the study area. The steps included: not to dress in camouflage (greens, khakis, commando type), not to pose as government officials (we were not!), not to use government vehicles, not to discuss anything about Naxalites, to have locals with us all the time etc. We obtained the gadget containing the recorded calls of the Jerdon's Courser from Jeganathan, the Senior Research Fellow working for his doctoral thesis on this rare bird at Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh,. The gadget is a small box that plays the call ten times. The call can be vocalized as "kwik-koo…kwik-koo" (Jeganathan, 2005a, b, and c). We got the call enhanced and replicated 100 times from a professional audio studio for better replay. We prepared a colour photo folder containing the pictures of Jerdon's Courser, Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) and Yellow-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus malabaricus*) face-to-face. We carried a powerful searchlight with us besides binoculars, spotting scope, cameras and video camera equipment.

Risks:

Whenever we used the searchlight, there was every probability of the Naxalites mistaking us for the Police on combing operations, and in the same manner, the police assuming us to be a band of Naxals moving stealthily in the forest. Both ways we could have got ambushed and every time we used the searchlight, the fear of getting shot vexed us!

Day-1 (9th June 2006):

Gadchiroli district is the easternmost tip of Maharashtra. The river Pranahita forms the southern boundary and the river Indravati forms the eastern boundary of the district. On first day, we traveled along this route to reach our first major stop, that is, Sironcha: Nagpur, Umred, Bhiwapur, Nagbhid, Bramhapuri, Armori, Gadchiroli, Chamorshi, Ghot, Ainapur, Somanpalli, Konesari, Ashti, Chaprala Sanctuary, Alapalli, Mosam, Bamni and Sironcha.

When we crossed Vainganga River before Armori town we saw nearly 60 Asian Openbills (*Anastomus oscitans*) in the river basin. At Konesari, there is a small patch of beautiful forest. Here we saw the Giant Squirrels and their nests. Giant Squirrel is the state animal of Maharashtra. Medpalliwar, the RFO was a knowledgeable person and informed us that previously there were 64 nests of Giant Squirrels and now there are 74 nests of Giant Squirrels.

In this small forest patch, we also saw birds like Mottled Wood Owl (*Strix ocellata*), Common Hawk Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx varius*), Asian Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), Rufous Treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*), Crested Tree Swift (*Hemiprocne coronata*), Black-rumped Flameback (*Dinopium benghalense*) and Oriental White-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*). After Alapalli the landscape resembles to that of Andhra Pradesh. The main crop is paddy, many speak Telugu, and the forest looks like that of Eastern Ghats.

We reached Sironcha in the late afternoon. Here Shaikh, the helpful RFO, arranged for our stay. First we called some knowledgeable locals. They were Sinu, Shafi and Shankar Gauraa Dongri. From the photos and call replays from the

call box, we got 'positive' information. Raju showed illustrations from Grimmet *et. al*'s (2000) guide to locals and asked for names in local Telugu language. From this discussion with locals we understood that in Telugu language (here) Red-wattled Lapwing is known as "*Kandledi Pittya*" and "Sitwa", Indian Courser is known as "*Kaalu Tellaga Untai*" and "*Pedda Sitwa*". But except "*Kandledi Pittya*" the remaining three names might be wrong as the locals often got confused with the names and pictures. Also we got three names for Jerdon's Courser viz., *Kaamjulu, Gabilam* and *Ahkdobera* (at Kopela). But nobody could understand the meaning of "*Adava-wuttu-titti*", the Telugu name given to the Jerdon's Courser in the Fauna of British India.

In the evening (7 to 9pm) we played the calls repeatedly in open scrub jungle near Sironcha and waited for the response. At one moment Thosar and Ashish Bhople felt they have heard the response of the Jerdon's Courser! However others did not hear it. We clearly heard calls of Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*), Red-wattled Lapwing, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Brainfever bird, and four species of Nightjars.

We stayed at the old Sironcha forest rest house. I had a small creepy guest in my room in the form of a snake, which I photographed.

Day-2 (10th June 2006):

On 10th June, we got up at 4 am. and started the call replays in the open scrub jungles of Nandigaon, near Sironcha. Here, due to encroachments of the open scrub jungle patches are getting converted to agriculture. Then we proceeded towards Marigudam and Tigalgudam. Here the forest is dense and hence the habitat did not look promising. While returning we replayed the calls near Rajiv Nagar and Arda villages but to no avail. In this session we saw two families of Small Green Bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*), Yellow-wattled lapwings, Black Ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*) and Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) in the cultivation, Indian Robins, Common Woodshrike (*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*), Bay-backed Shrikes (*Lanius vittatus*) on perches, Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*), Large Grey Babbler (*Turdoides striatus*), House Swifts (*Apus affinis*), Asian Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*), Black Drongos (*Dicrurus macrocercus*), Eurasian Collared Doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*), Jungle Crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) and Yellow-legged Buttonquail (*Turnix tanki*). A tree of Toddy Palm had around 40 nests of Baya Weavers.

With the sweetest song among babblers, Yellow-billed Babbler (White-headed Babbler) (*Turdoides affinis*) was a treat to see and listen here. The sweet long calls confused us as it is different from other babblers.

On the road to Asaralli (approximately 15 kilometers east of Sironcha) near a Christian cemetery a Neem tree had around 40 nests of Baya Weavers (*Ploceus philippinus*). Here the habitat was open scrub jungle and the two species of Lapwings were seen all around.

In the afternoon we moved to Asaralli range, east of Sironcha. We had no option but to travel by the forest department's jeep, as there was no fuel available for our car at the solitary petrol pump in Sironcha. The journey was along the river Pranahita. We saw the riverbank and agricultural lands which were completely overtaken by *Parthenium* grass.

Now our guides were Narayan Bore, in his sixties and Tirupati Dhannore, in his late twenties. In the evening, we returned to Ankisa, 11 km west of Asaralli towards Sironcha. We expected this area to be the same where the Jerdon's Courser was sighted earlier. While going to Asaralli we had noticed a fairly good scrub jungle. The evening was tense, as we did a 'transect' along an undisturbed patch of the scrub jungle. Here also the Lapwings were numerous. We saw a Jungle Owlet (*Glaucidium radiatum*) and heard calls of Nightjars (*Caprimulgus affinis, C. asiaticus and C. indicus*) and Spotted Owlets. In the evening we saw a wave of frantic excitements when Raju declared to have a Jerdon's Courser in sight. But it wasn't. We played the calls from 6 to 9 pm. We stayed for the night at Ankisa forest rest house.

Day-3 (11th June 2006):

At 5 am we started the transect survey along the road towards Kopela village. However after a kilometer the scrub jungle landscape changed to teak forest and then to evergreen forest of the Eastern Ghats. We continued the route via Bodla Nullah, Somanpalli and stopped at Kopela. Forester Jangamwar helped us meet the shy and introvert locals and to discuss the birds. The locals knew only Telugu, and Tirupati came to our help as an interpreter. The calls of Jerdon's Courser did not elicit any response from the forest as well as from the locals.

Not much bird activity was seen, till the village Somanpalli. However after a few kilometers from Somanpalli there was lot of bird activity and the forest was green and dense. Here we saw Yellow-footed Green Pigeons (*Treron phoenicoptera*), White-breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*), Spotted Doves (*Streptopelia chinensis*), White-bellied Drongos (*Dicrurus caerulescens*), Crested Serpent Eagle, Indian Pittas (*Pitta brachyuran*), Eurasian Golden Orioles (*Oriolus Oriolus*), Blue-tailed Bee-eaters (*Merops philippinus*), Eurasian Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) and many commoner species. We saw many Giant Squirrels and their nests on trees.

Information about vultures received here:

Shaikh, the RFO, Sironcha, gave us important information about the avifauna. Five years back (2000-2001) the Municipality had killed around 40-50 stray dogs in Sironcha by poisoning them. The carcasses were thrown on the bank of Pranahita river. Nearly 150 vultures died after consuming these poisoned carcasses! He also added that he had personally seen around 15 vultures a month back near Sironcha. But he could not identify the species from the bird books.

Gahokar, the RFO of Asaralli, also gave us similar information. During 1999-2000, some cattle of the village died after consuming poisoned grains. These were thrown on the outskirts of the village. The ill-fated vultures took turns to devour the carcasses. More than 100 vultures died in this single incident! He also informed that he had not seen vultures for the past 3-4 years. He also shared one incident in which a villager had killed and devoured one Malabar Pied Hornbill (*Anthracoceros coronatus*).

Some general observations:

1. Very few birds could be seen near villages.
2. Locals do hunting using a horn, which produces 'kirrrrr' sound and a searchlight.
3. Two groups of boys were seen in Sironcha hunting birds with catapults.
4. Asian Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*) are very common in the villages.

Names of birds in local Telugu language:

Here is a list of local names of the birds in local Telugu language as divulged by villagers.

All Quails:	*Kured Pittya*
Common Bustard Quail:	*Puradpittya*
All Partridges:	*Kounjipittya*
All Egrets:	*Konga*
Grey Heron:	*Police Konga*
Domestic Hen:	*Kodi*
Common Peafowl:	*Nemeli*
Red Junglefowl (male): (female):	*Karkodi Punju*, *Kaarkodi*
Grey Junglefowl (male): (female):	*Chedalkodi Punju*, *Chedalkodi*
Jerdon's Courser:	*Kaamjulu, Gabilam* and *Ahkdobera* (?)
Red-wattled Lapwing:	*Kandledi Pittya*, *Sitwa* (?)
Yellow-wattled Lapwing:	*Chinna Sitwa*
Indian Courser:	*Kaalu Tellaga Untai* and *Pedda Sitwa* (?)

Eurasian Thick-knee:	*Puradpittya*
Common Hoopoe:	*Adla Pittya*
Indian Roller:	Paalpittya
Malabar Pied Hornbill and Grey Hornbill both:	*Soompnath,*
Eurasian Eagle Owl:	*Gudla Gufa*, *Pedapitta*
Spotted Owlet:	*Gudla Gufa*
Barn Owl:	*Pied Kantha, Phaidi Kaanthe*
Nightjars:	*Nelatappidi*
Roseringed Parakeet:	*Ramchilka*
Alexandrine Parakeet:	*Khakiroba*
Blossom-headed Parakeet:	*Chilka*
All Eagles:	*Kookkoosam, Dega*
Common Pariah Kite:	*Gadda*
All Vultures:	*Pantaregadi*
White-breasted Waterhen:	*Poolakodi*
Small Green Bee-eater:	*Relapittya*
Yellow-legged Green Pigeon:	*Polgu*
Blue Rock Pigeon:	*Payram*
Doves:	*Goowa*
Baya Weaver Birds:	*Jakor Pittya*
Black Drongo:	*Nalla Pitta*
Red-vented Bulbul:	*Piklennka*
Black Ibis:	*Neer Kaaki*
House Crow:	*Kaaki*
Indian Koel:	*Koyalam*
Greater Coucal:	*Samur Kaaki*
Common Myna:	*Gorenka*
All Babblers:	*Putta Sitwa*
Asian Palm Swift:	*Mangalkatti*
House Sparrow:	*Urvista*.

Epilogue:

Though our expedition failed to rediscover the Jerdon's Courser, we are sure some day it will be rediscovered here. The forest department has strongly advised us not to go for a second expedition, as the situation has worsened now. Though we are holding back at present, we hope, to rediscover the bird sooner than later. But whatever the issues, the Naxalites by and large are not against wildlife and or birds!

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Mujumdar, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Maharashtra State) for helping us in undertaking the expedition. Thanks to Shaikh, RFO, Sironcha, Gahokar, RFO, Asaralli, and Jangamwar, Forester, Kopela for making our stay safe and comfortable and for helping us always. Thanks to Ashish Bhople for accompanying us during the trip. Thanks to Rafique for driving us safely through the troubled areas. Thanks to Jeganathan for providing us the gadget containing the calls of Jerdon's Courser.

References:

Ali S. and Ripley, S. D. (1987): *Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*. Oxford Univ. Press. Vo.1-10.

Birdlife International (2001): *Threatened Birds of Asia CD-ROM*. The Birdlife International Red Data Book. Cambridge, UK.

D'Abreu E. A. (1935): A list of the birds of Central Provinces. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc*.38: 95-116.

Grimmett R., Inskipp C., Inskipp T.,(2000) *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*, Oxford Univ. Press.1-384.

Jeganathan, P. (2005a): Radio tagging the Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*). *Mistnet.* Vol.6 (2): 8-9

Jeganathan, P. (2005b): The canal and the Courser. *Hornbill.* Oct-Dec: 4-10.

Jeganathan, P. (2005c): Telugu-Ganga canal construction in the Jerdon's Courser habitat. *Mistnet.* Vol.6 (4):12-13.

View publication stats